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C O N F I D E N T I A L KUWAIT 001594

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/ARPI AND NEA/PI, ABU DHABI FOR MEPI

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/17/2015

TAGS: PREL KMPI PGOV PHUM KU MEPI

SUBJECT: GOK SKITTISH ABOUT MEPI FUNDING, ASSERTS FOREIGN FUNDING OF KUWAITI NGOS ILLEGAL

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Minister of Social Affairs and Labor Faisal Hajji Boukhadour voiced his concerns to the Ambassador about Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) funding of Kuwaiti organizations during an April 13 meeting. Under Kuwaiti law, he said, non-governmental organizations may not receive funding from foreign sources. The rationale behind the ban, Boukhadour explained, is to prevent "the dangerous side" from influencing Kuwaiti politics. He reported an incident in which candidates for the National Assembly received or attempted to receive funding from the Iranian Embassy, which caught the GOK's attention and caused problems.

¶2. (C) The Minister stressed that Kuwait will never forget what the U.S. has done for the country, but the GOK must enforce the funding restriction universally in order to keep certain elements out. If the U.S. is allowed to donate money, "some people will use this against you and us," added Boukhadour. The Ambassador asked for a copy of the specific law regulating NGO funding. The Minister also noted that the GOK itself, through the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, provides funding for worthy projects by NGOs.

¶3. (C) The DCM further discussed MEPI programs April 18 with Ambassador Khaled Al-Babtain, Director of the MFA Americas' Desk. His office previously had requested information on MEPI following Post's March 30 press release announcing the small grants program. Al-Babtain, echoing concerns about Iranian influence in Kuwait, reasserted that foreign funding to NGOs is illegal, said the GOK would fund NGO activities upon request and asked that Post provide specific information on the grants it intends to approve.

¶4. (SBU) Additionally, an Arabic daily printed an editorial April 12, which questioned the dimensions of MEPI, considering financial contributions as interference in internal Kuwaiti affairs. One of the paper's editors told PAO that GOK sources had mentioned to him on more than one occasion that they were very conscious of being viewed as American stooges. The previous public criticism of MEPI was an October 2004 article citing Islamist MP Walid Tabtabae who labeled a DC-based training course, "Leadership and Decision Making for Women in Leadership Positions," a U.S. attempt to "promote mixing of the sexes." Islamists have portrayed MEPI funding as American interference and used it to criticize reform-minded Kuwaitis.

¶5. (U) Note: Only one grantee, the Kuwait Economic Society, received an FY04 MEPI small grant for Kuwait. Criticism of this project is, in part, due to the very public persona of its outspoken chairperson. The Society, like approximately 30% of NGOs in Kuwait, is officially recognized by the Government. End note.

¶6. (C) Comment: The small grants program has been the proximate cause of the GOK's unease about MEPI funding. The presence of a MEPI-funded NDI adviser on women's issues did not cause much of a stir or elicit government objections. Exchanges and training through MEPI have also occurred without difficulty. We understand the GOK's concern about Iranian influence. It is a point we often made ourselves in relation to the Iraqi elections. We will need to be creative in continuing to support reformers while avoiding a counter-productive bilateral confrontation. Our leverage is limited. Kuwait is, of course, not an aid recipient. In fact, it makes major financial contributions to the U.S. presence in Kuwait and by extension in Iraq. End comment.

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LEBARON